

POKER CHAMPION

Amarillo Slim: Life Is a Game He Plays to Win

BY TED THACKERY JR.

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It was 3 a.m. in Las Vegas—the time of night when casinos along the Strip may find themselves all but deserted and even the clockless action of Glitter Gulch seems to pause for a moment, to yawn.

Amarillo Slim Preston was looking for a game. Just any game at all . . .

"As long as it's for real money," he amended, rocking the weight of his lank frame onto the heels of \$1,000 anteater-hide cowboy boots and inching a pearl-gray stetson toward the back of his head.

"Seems like a feller ought to be able to get a game like that—something interesting, you know—in a town like this here. But I swear to goodness I just can't hardly find a thing to occupy my time!"

To an outsider, Slim's complaint might have seemed remarkable. He had, after all, won \$60,000 and the third annual World Series of Poker after a five-day blood-and-money session that ended less than two hours earlier.

All He Has Is Time, Expertise

"But that was then," he sighed, "and this is now. Feller like me, he is kind of like a doctor or a lawyer you know, purty near the only stock in trade he has got is his time . . ."

. . . And expertise; Slim can, at times, be peculiarly self-effacing. Still, his analogy with medicine and the law was neither ill-drawn nor offhand. Both are classified as professions and Thomas Austin (Amarillo Slim) Preston Jr. is nothing if not professional.

He is a professional gambler.

Since his late teens (Slim is 42) he has had no other full-time occupation. He can and does play almost any game that can be played for money. He plays constantly, devotedly, joyously, wholeheartedly and with passion—as certain consecrated artists practice their art.

And he is a success in his chosen field.

Remote From Character

The stereotype image of the gambler as a compulsive loser who tempts the gods of chance from subconscious motives of suicide is as remote from Slim's character as his home is from the mountains of the moon.

And that is remote, indeed, for Slim is a Texan who lives well—even by Texas standards.

His home (in Amarillo, naturally; Slim's nickname is honestly acquired) is a rambling brick structure set in well-kept grounds with an olympic-size swimming pool, golf-putting course and stables completing the picture of a life-style both generous and open.

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Amarillo Slim---Always Looking for a Gamble

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His friends and neighbors ("I know maybe half the folks there in that town. The other half likely I just haven't had time to meet, yet") are aware—theoretically, from hearsay—that he is a gambler. But few, if any, can testify to that fact from personal experience.

"I play most games pretty good, see," he explained, with characteristic understatement. "So I always made it a point not to play any of them, for money anyway, there in Amarillo."

"Only a damn fool will play a game to lose. But if a feller wins from them all the time, it kind of leaves a bad taste in some folks' mouths. I like to keep my professional life and my home life separate."

So separate, in fact, that his wife and three children know almost nothing of Slim's business affairs.

"My wife, Helen Elizabeth," he smiled reminiscently, "can't hardly tell one card in the deck from another. If she ever played a game of chance in her life, I'd be right surprised to hear of it."

"Oh, at the races sometimes—I owned me a few race horses, once upon a time; didn't do too well, neither. You shouldn't never have a hobby that eats—at the races, she'll now and again make a \$2 bet. But that's about the limit."

"Oh, she is some kind of fine woman, that Helen Elizabeth . . ."

The Prestons were high school sweethearts in Amarillo and were married shortly after Slim returned to that city at the end of his first "world tour" as a professional billiard player.

"That's how I'm listed, you know, on the income tax forms," he said. "And it's a true fact. Billiards (I play one-pocket and bumpers) is my best game. In fact, it's how I guess I got started . . ."

Actually, the starting point was Slim's enlistment in the Navy.

Enlistment Team

"I was going to Peabody Academy, on the campus of the University of Arkansas," he said, "and, I tell you the truth, I was pretty bored. So here come a Navy enlistment team . . ."

The Navy men said anyone who enlisted could have a high school graduation diploma, with a C-plus grade average.

Slim had to wait three days (because that was how long it was until his 17th birthday) and then signed up for three years.

Another youngster, perhaps, might have found the Navy somewhat restricting. Especially if he were accustomed to a somewhat free-and-easy life. But Slim had done a bit of planning in advance.

"What I did," he said, "I worked it around to be the yeoman-chauffeur for this Navy captain. I picked that captain out real careful, so as to give myself maximum mobility . . ."

Driving the captain around, he said, took about an hour out of his day. The rest of the time, Slim had the use of a Navy sedan—and freedom to visit pool halls from one end of the West Coast to the other. And the profits were an eye-opener, even to him.

Lays Foundation

He not only was able to lay the foundation of what was to be a considerable personal fortune during his Navy service, but was invited to join Special Services as a civilian, for a series of pocket billiards exhibitions throughout Europe when he was discharged.

The tour thus arranged was, if anything, even less restricting than his Navy career had been.

Billiards tournaments were held before his visits to each military base, the winner to meet Slim in exhibition match. It took about five hours a week, and left Slim free to "learn other games" during the off-hours. So by the time the tour was finished, his decision was made.

He went home. And he told Miss Helen Elizabeth Blier how he intended to live his life. And she told him she thought it would

be all right with her. And it must have been, because they have been married ever since.

They have three children: Thomas Austin Preston III, who is 20, Rebecca Ruth, 12, and Todd Alan, 8. And the Preston life-style seems to suit them well, too.

"They don't worry," Slim said, "whether daddy won or lost. Damn seldom, in fact, that anyone'll even ask. But when someone does, they always know what the answer is going to be."

"Just fine," I'll say, 'just couldn't be better!' and that's regardless whether I won a pile of money or lost it. They talk a lot, these days, about kids not being secure . . . why, nonsense!

"Looky here—secure, for a kid, is knowing your folks love you and are looking out for you. It ain't got a thing in this world to do with having money nor not having it. Now, you know that's true."

"I was pretty lucky there, myself. Never had any doubts did my own folks think well of me. So I been pretty careful, with my own kids, to see they get the same kind of assurance . . ."

Assurance is, indeed, a major factor in Slim Preston's life.

Without it, he would probably be unable to continue his chosen career. And he believes it is a prime asset for any man who intends his life to be more than mere existence, regardless of other factors.

Theory on Life

Slim has a theory that a man gambles in pretty much the same way he lives his life; that he displays—perhaps in exaggerated fashion—in games of chance the same facets of character which make him an individual.

A recent private survey indicated that at least \$750 billion changes hands annually over various games of skill and chance in the United States, and that roughly half the citizens of this country gamble in one way or another, at everything from a church lottery ticket to the Irish Sweepstakes to highrolling casino action.

And that same survey indicated that most gamblers are losers.

And why do they lose? "Most folks," Slim said, "would really rather lose than win. It's like they were trying to make some kind of sacrifice, to atone for something. The difference between a winner and a loser—and don't you never forget it—is just a matter of what you think of yourself."

Professional Role

So the first thing a professional gambler has to do, he said, is to make friends with himself.

"If you think you done something awful, sometime or other," Slim advised, "then go own up to it. Fix whatever damage you think you done if you can. Give yourself an order to make sure you don't do a n y t h i n g like that again."

"And then, damn it, forget the whole thing!"

Making peace with yourself, he said, is the first requisite for any winner, at gambling or anything else. Having done this, you are ready to play because you are no longer trying to find excuses for failure.

"Then," he said, "get rid of any excuses you may already have in stock . . ."

Slim has nothing against liquor, per se. But he does not drink. He says he never much enjoyed the effects of intoxication, and of course eschews it—as any good player does—when engaged in such pursuits as poker, which require concentration.

"But a feller is sure not going to offend me by drinking when I'm around," he grinned. "Especially if we're playing some game for money. In fact, I might even pay for his drinks . . ."

That is another tenet of Slim's gaming philosophy:

"You play to win," he said. "A feller might be a real good friend of mine away from the table. But when you sit down to gamble, you two are enemies until the game is over. Anything goes."

"Like I said during that World Series of Poker—while we're at the table,

I'd slip a rattlesnake in my best friend's pocket, and then ask him for a match."

The truth, however, is not quite "anything goes."

One thing that definitely does not go—with Slim, at any rate—is cheating.

"Man's a fool to do a thing like that," he snorted. "For one thing, there's only so many ways a feller can cheat at any game, and by this time I reckon I know about most of them."

"Oh, sure, it's been tried. And on me as often as on anyone."

"But I made me a standing offer, a long time ago, and I'm still waiting for someone to take me up on it."

"The offer is this—buy

yourself a round-trip ticket from wherever you are to Amarillo, and back. Then bring your money and come play me a game. And use any fool gimmick, any device, any trick you like. If you can get away with it, you keep what you win off me."

"But if I catch you . . . your bankroll stays in Amarillo, and you use the other half of that round-trip ticket."

For his own part, Slim seems to have little trouble finding games. Despite his 3 a.m. lament in Las Vegas, he is a kind of walking magnet for information concerning high-

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microfilm.

Amarillo Slim Preston

UPI photo

GAMBLER

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stake action all over the
world.

"People talk to me," he
said. "They tell me things.
Few months ago I was
down in the Caribbean—
never mind just where—
and a bartender I know
told me about some Vene-
zuelans looking for a good
game.

"I went to see them in
Caracas, but they had
gone to Aruba, so I hooked
up with them there. Later,
when that game was over,
I heard of another one in
Sydney, Australia . . ."

His travels, in pursuit of
high-stake games, have
taken him more times
around the world than he
can remember.

Slim's notion is that a
man who does not enjoy
his work or his way of liv-
ing is "in the wrong line."
His own way of life, on the
other hand, he finds
uniquely satisfactory.

"It satisfies me and I'm
the only one who has to
like it. I've had folks ask
me, now and then, why I
don't stop doing the things
I do and get into some-
thing 'worthwhile.'

"Now — that's a silly
thing to say.

"What should I get into?
Something I don't know
how to do, like building
computers or inventing
medical wonder-drugs, or
maybe making atom
bombs or being a college
professor or something?

"World be better off if I
made myself unhappy by
opening up a shoe store or
running a automobile ga-
rage or going to farming?

"I'm not what the
youngsters call 'goal or-
iented.'

"I mean, I don't want to
have as much money as H.
L. Hunt or Howard
Hughes; I got no specific
amount I'm aiming for,
and then I quit. I'm enjoy-
ing the trip as I go along,
having me a good time and
trying to make my family
happy and the people I
like happy, too.

"Listen, my friend, most
of the things in this world
that I want are things I
have got. I enjoy gam-
bling. I don't hurt a soul
doing it, and there can't
nobody tell me that is a
wrong way to go."

"And if the world ended
tomorrow—or if I ended
tomorrow—I couldn't re-
gret a bit of it. Not one
damn thing! And how
many men you know who
can say as much . . .?"

Bluffing in Poker

Amarillo Slim Preston,
of course, may be speaking
something less than the
truth. Bluff is a prime ele-
ment of poker, and he is
an experienced player. If
anyone could bring off
such a lie, it would be he.

But his words have at
least the advantage of ap-
parent logic; he seems at
ease, the 140 pounds of his
6-foot 2-inch body relaxed
and tensionless as he sur-
veys through quiet eyes
the night that has become
morning as he talked.

Las Vegas, never entire-
ly asleep, is stirring now
to full wakefulness. A new
day has come, but the
game Slim hoped to find
has not and now he is rest-
less to be on his way.

The truth about Amaril-
lo Slim?

It is known to only one
man:

Name—Thomas Austin
Preston Jr.

Occupation—gambler.

Destination — wherever
he can find the biggest,
the best, the most furious
action in a world that
seems, for the time being
at least, to be dealing him
nothing but ace-high
straights . . . all in the
same suit.